

Expats

The monk keeping his Armenian heritage alive in Venice

Father Hamazasp Kechichian mourns for his war-torn homeland from a tranquil island in the lagoon



Father Hamazasp Kechichian at the Armenian monastery on San Lazzaro degli Armeni in Venice

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In the middle of the Venetian lagoon, near the Lido, lies a remarkable island that escapes the radar of checklist tourists. It is an oasis of calm and spacious gardens, fragrant with pine, roses and the residual trail of incense. In the silence, you hear birdsong, the thrice daily tolling of bells and the plangent echo of Armenian chants. For an hour or so each day, you will also hear a guide showing a small group the treasures and achievements of this place, which have been admired by luminaries including Pope Pius VII, Lord Byron, George Sand and Richard Wagner. If you are lucky, that guide might be Father Hamazasp Kechichian, one of just 17 souls living on the island in buildings dating from the 18th century.

The island, San Lazzaro degli Armeni, has been home to a community of Mekhitarist monks — Armenian Catholics who follow the Armenian rite and liturgy — since a monastery was founded on the former leper colony by the eponymous Abbot Mekhitar in 1717. For Kechichian, the tranquillity is a far cry from the troubles that besiege his home town of Kessab, near the Turkish border in Syria.

“The attack from rebel forces on 21 March 2014 — [Syrian] Mother’s Day, as it happens — was completely unexpected,” he says. “Rebels launched missiles from Turkey, then crossed the border . . . Churches and icons were destroyed; houses burnt. My grandfather’s tomb was [desecrated]. Seven-hundred families fled with nothing. My family took refuge in Latakia, then Anjar [Lebanon] and returned after the Syrian army retook Kessab in mid-June. They found nothing left. Everyone must start again from zero. And there is still a risk.”

Kechichian was born into the predominantly Armenian community of Kessab in 1980. “It is unique among towns of the diaspora,” he says. “Armenians have lived there for over 500 years, the last remnants of the ancient Kingdom of Cilicia. Our ancient traditions are still practised — oral traditions. We even have our own dialect.” He recalls a blissful childhood. “My cousins used to come every summer from Aleppo, and we would stay in my grandmother’s house to pick apples. Kessab is famous for its apples. Then in autumn, we would make grape syrup. It was a beautiful place — and had many tourists until recently. The people are simple and very hospitable. There is beautiful nature, mountains, sea, fresh air . . . It is a lost paradise.”

At the age of 15, Kechichian left his home town. “I decided I wanted to become a priest,” he says, “so I spent two years in an Armenian Catholic seminary in Lebanon. My mother is Armenian Apostolic [Orthodox], my brother works in an Armenian Protestant school. I chose the Mekhitarist order because Mekhitar worked for all Armenians, without distinction.”



The island of San Lazzaro, just off the Lido in Venice

In 1997 Kechichian arrived at the mother seat of the Mekhitarists, San Lazzaro, where his uncle was abbot. Three years later, philosophical and theological studies took him to Rome, then back to Lebanon, before he returned to Venice where he was ordained at San Lazzaro in 2007. As well as working on a thesis about feasts dedicated to the church, he is also vice-rector of the seminary, with responsibility for the island's 40,000 annual visitors and the kitchens, where he consults with the cook on daily menus, occasionally donning an apron himself. "It's usually Italian food," he says, "but sometimes we make Armenian dishes out of nostalgia . . . On feast days, we drink Mekhitarine — a liqueur made to a 16th-century recipe by our sister-monastery in Vienna. Here, we make rose-petal jam, from the lilac-coloured roses in our gardens."

Kechichian has special dispensation from the abbot to make daily trips to the Lido to collect bread and post, as well as weekly visits to the market for vegetables and monthly trips to Venice "for a big shop". Meals are taken in silence in a wood-panelled refectory, where the abbot sits beneath a painting of the Last Supper while a novice reads the scriptures from a pulpit above.

Typically, the monks rise at 6am. "We have prayers three times a day, including Mass," says Kechichian.

The monks of San Lazzaro have long been famed for their scholarship, and translations. The monastery's museums and libraries represent the largest repository of Armenian culture in the diaspora. They also contain 30,000 European printed books, dating from 1400 to 1800, and 4,500 manuscripts dating from 862AD, including early translations of ancient works whose originals have been lost.

Kechichian stays in regular contact with his family in Syria via Skype and WhatsApp

From 1789 until 1996, the monastery operated its own printing press and, at its height, the polyglot monks published works in 36 languages. Such scholarship proved to be the saviour of the community: Napoleon designated San Lazzaro an academic institution, thereby sparing it from the destruction suffered by other monasteries.

"My most important education — my spiritual and cultural values — come from Kessab and San Lazzaro," says Kechichian, who stays in regular contact with his family in Syria via Skype and WhatsApp. "I am suffering for all Armenians and for all the people of Syria. It is a beautiful country, with so much culture, so much history. All destroyed. The Latin bishop of Aleppo was asking 'How can the west let this happen?'"

Five hours have passed in conversation. "I'm sorry," says Kechichian, "I must go. Visitors are arriving for a tour, and I will give a talk about culture and history." Perhaps this will take place in the book-lined room where Byron spent six months in 1816, studying the Armenian language under the tutelage of the monks. "A seventh-century BC Egyptian mummy lives there now," says Kechichian. "The gift of an Egyptian prime minister. It is very popular with visitors".

Inside knowledge

What you can buy for . . .

€500,000 A one-bedroom studio apartment

€1m A three-bedroom loft-style apartment in a palazzo in Cannaregio

€2m A four-bedroom apartment in a palazzo on the Grand Canal

Kechichian's verdict . . .

Pros

- Venice is an important cultural crossroads
- Many Armenians visit the monastery and it is rewarding to tell them about their culture and history
- San Lazzaro is one of the main spiritual centres for Armenians around the world

Cons

- It can be very cold and damp in winter, stifling in summer
- Infrequent boat service to San Lazzaro
- Only a tiny Armenian community (20 families) in Venice

Favourite places

- Sitting on **Lord Byron's Hill** in the monastery gardens opposite the Lido in the summer — a good place to meditate
- Watching the sunset over Venice from the roof of the monastery's boat garage — we call it **the Octagon**
- Bernardo Strozzi's **painting of the Annunciation** in the church

Teresa Levonian Cole was a guest of the St Regis Venice San Clemente Palace hotel and Kirker Holidays

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